

BOOK REVIEW

A SEASON OF INQUIRY

The Senate Intelligence Investigation.
By Loch K. Johnson.
Illustrated. 317 pp. Lexington:
The University Press of Kentucky. \$31.

PRESIDENTS' SECRET WARS

*CIA and Pentagon Covert Operations
Since World War II.*
By John Prados.
480 pp. New York:
William Morrow & Company. \$22.95.

By Sanford J. Ungar

THERE is nothing that can damage a reputation — or a Presidency — like a secret war. And now Ronald Reagan has his.

It hardly seemed as if there could be anything secret left about American aid to the rebels fighting to overthrow the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. Indeed, it was in Central America that the words "secret" and "covert" finally lost all meaning as descriptive terms for elements of American foreign and military policy. But the revelations of recent weeks — that the United States was secretly sending weapons to Iran, and that excess profits from the transactions were being funneled through Swiss bank accounts to the contras — indicate just how little the public, the press and Congress really knew about the private foreign policy being run out of the White House basement.

Attempts will now be made to remedy that situation. Congress, understandably skeptical about the Reagan Administration's promises to cleanse itself, will conduct its own investigations of the roles played by the National Security Council, the Central Intelligence Agency and other not-so-accountable dark corners of the Government. Laws will surely be passed to prevent a repetition of such abuses, and the nation will undoubtedly enter a period of foreign policy "reform." It may be useful, in the midst of a situation that seems truly out of control, to think back to the mid-1970's, when, with great hoopla, Congress made an effort to assert control over the Federal intelligence agencies — to rein them in by exposing past abuses and setting new standards.

Fired by post-Watergate Congressional bravado, fueled by spectacular revelations in the press and fanned by the egos of key political figures, that effort was cast as a serious blow to the intelligence community. Within the agencies themselves, there was talk of "a struggle for survival."

Survival was never really an issue, of course, and although the various agencies went through some rough times and a few heads rolled, the C.I.A., the National Security Agency and other departments of Government surmounted this domestic challenge quite well. As the events at the heart of the current crisis demonstrate, they have continued to operate, for the most part, without any real charter or precise legal definition of their responsibilities. The only recent threat to them has come from the espionage of foreign powers and their undetected American agents.

Indeed, never has the C.I.A. been so well funded, and so free to conduct its own foreign policy, as under President Reagan and his Director of Central Intelligence, William Casey. This is true despite the fact, highlighted by John Prados in his exhaustive study, "Presidents' Secret Wars," that American covert and paramilitary actions since World War II have often failed.

The reform movement of the 70's, as Mr. Prados understates it, "proved abortive." There is no better way to find out why than by reading Loch K. Johnson's book "A Season of Inquiry," a chronicle of the 1975-76 Senate investigation of intelligence abuses headed by Frank Church, then a Democratic senator from Idaho, who died in 1984. Mr. Johnson, now teaching political science at the University of Georgia, was an aide to the chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence Activities, and so he was an inside observer of an extraordinary sequence of events.

What becomes clear at the outset of Mr. Johnson's account is that many members of this elite Senate committee, which had a potentially historic mandate, did not really care to rock the intelligence boat. They were cautious, quarrelsome and interested primarily in publicity for their own benefit. This includes Church, who, it turns out, put pressure on the majority leader at the time, Mike Mansfield, to name him to the post (Mansfield's original choice was Senator Philip Hart of Michigan, who was too ill to accept), and then used it to start a late-blooming run for the 1976 Democratic Presidential nomination.

Mr. Johnson means to be kind to his mentor. But this inside tale of the Senate intelligence investigation will hardly lead historians to look favorably on the Idaho politician who was first elected to the Senate in 1956 and was regarded as an often lonely beacon of liberalism for the next two decades.

The Frank Church we meet here is an indecisive, poorly organized, brooding, angry man, who names a chief counsel and a staff director who cannot get along and then abdicates any responsibility to deal with their rivalry. He gives the C.I.A. the catchy epithet of "rogue elephant," over the objections of fellow committee members who feel this lets Presidents, secretaries of state and others who approved or ignored C.I.A. abuses off the hook. And, perhaps most tellingly, he finally advises Loch Johnson that the only briefings he cares to have before holding public hearings are those that can be muttered to him while he strides (Church was the master of the senatorial stride) from his office to the hearing room.

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ine (some would say tragic) irony in all this is that although it did not ultimately accomplish very much, the intelligence investigation stuck to Church like the most insidious kind of fungus. The select committee became known in common parlance as the Church committee, and the veteran liberal eventually had to defend himself against accusations that he had personally weakened the American intelligence community and, in the process, the nation's ability to operate effectively in

the world. Indeed, the efforts of former intelligence officers helped defeat him for re-election in 1980.

Some readers would undoubtedly argue that Mr. Johnson makes too much of what will someday seem like a minor interlude in the history of Congress and the United States intelligence community. But he tells a good yarn, and even if it sometimes appears a bit ingenuous, it provides important insights into the real world of Capitol Hill; it also reveals just how uneven the odds are — as they are now — when senators and their staffs go up against the intelligence agencies.

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Mr. Prados, who is the author of "The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence and Russian Military Strength," has written a far less engaging, although equally important, book. His recounting of the often neglected early days of the C.I.A. and its covert activities is especially enlightening. Few questions seem to have been asked about the consequences, or the prospects for success, before agents infiltrated the postwar Soviet lines to cause trouble. And in China, after the Communist takeover, the angry C.I.A. chose to aid a renegade group that had no hope of damaging the regime.

Indeed, with few exceptions, despite euphemistic, optimistic names like "Valuable" and "Success," many of America's covert operations come across as something out of "The Mouse That Roared" or "The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" — fumbling schemes that result in enormous losses of lives and money, not to mention United States national honor. As Mr. Prados puts it, "The CIA was unleashed in the name of democracy, but democracy ... came to mean governments that followed pro-American policies." Regimes that were installed or propped up in ostensibly successful C.I.A. operations — in Iran and Guatemala, for example — tended to suspend elections and suppress dissent, all in the name of fighting Communism.

Worst of all, these policies were carried out with little or no dissent within the United States Government. When the C.I.A. removed the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, in order to put the Shah back on his throne, those who opposed the plan (including Loy Henderson, the American Ambassador in Teheran at the time) remained silent.

The precedents set by, and the results that have flowed from, these events are painfully obvious. The parallels today, in Nicaragua, Angola and other places known and unknown, are clear. Alas, the C.I.A. becomes known for those efforts rather than for the occasions when its advice goes against the grain (as when it argued, correctly, that the United States could not win the war in Vietnam).

There is another important lesson in "Presidents' Secret Wars": that for the most part, the C.I.A. has not behaved like a "rogue elephant." On the contrary, in its covert actions, it has usually carried out decisions made or encouraged by others. It is those decisions — symptoms of a misbegotten foreign policy of frustration — and the effort of Presidents and secretaries of state to avoid responsibility for them that require much more attention.

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